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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 NEW DELHI 005165

SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: LET PRIME SUSPECT IN SYMBOLIC AYODHYA ATTACK

REF: NEW DELHI 4449

Classified By: PolCouns Geoff Pyatt, for Reasons 1.4 (B, D)

1. (C) Summary: The July 5 attempt by suspected Lashkar-e-Tayyiba (LeT) terrorists to wreck the controversial Ayodhya temple site was foiled by Indian security forces who had been previously alerted that the group might target religious sites. The incident, however, is causing significant ripples in India's domestic politics and cross-border diplomacy. The GOI and Indian commentators say that the terrorists, who have not yet been positively identified, had hoped to ignite a domestic firestorm with their attack, similar to what happened when the mosque was destroyed by Hindus in 1992. At present, Hindu-Muslim violence appears unlikely. The assault has been condemned by politicians of every stripe, including Kashmiri separatists and Hizbul Mujahideen, but the Indo-Pak peace process may suffer if the attackers prove to be Pakistan-based. Indian Foreign Minister Natwar Singh pointedly told Pakistan Prime Minister Aziz during a summit in Kazakhstan that the GOI would soon show Islamabad they had "concrete proof" that infiltration continues. Police forces throughout the country remain on alert, especially at religious and historic sites, because this attack -- and possibly follow-on attempts -- targeted a symbolic site and was not designed to maximize casualties. This cable addresses what we currently know about the attack itself; separate analysis of likely effects on Indian domestic politics and Indo-Pak rapprochement will follow septels. End Summary.

Attack on the Fabric of Indian Society

2. (C) At around 8:30 am on July 5, six terrorists posing as Hindu pilgrims detonated a bomb that blasted a hole through the outer wall of the Ayodhya temple complex. The site itself is unremarkable. The real target was India's multireligious society, which the terrorists sought to roil through their action. After the explosion, the group charged toward their apparent target, the construction area where a temple to Ram had been planned to be built on the site of the former Babri Mosque. The terrorists failed in their attempts to damage the site despite their reported use of hand grenades and a rocket-propelled grenade launcher. After a two-hour-long gunfight, all the terrorists had been killed. One, rigged as a second human bomb, apparently detonated during the firefight, before he could close the gap to the site. Officials are not yet confirming what kind of explosives the two suicide bombers used. Aside from the terrorists, one unidentified woman was killed during the grenade attack. Several Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) officers were wounded, none critically.

PM Condemns Attack, Displays Resolve and Calm

3. (U) Following a meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Political Affairs later on July 5, PM Manmohan Singh expressed his "shock" at the attack "aimed at destabilizing society" and promised that the GOI will "deal firmly" with all such attacks. He also appealed for the populace to remain calm and called on all political parties to "help maintain peace and communal harmony." The GOI has so far refused to blame publicly any group, but unnamed news sources claim that they have been told by informants within the GOI that Pakistan-based LeT is the prime suspect.

Preliminary Reporting Suggests LeT

4. (C) Although not conclusive, many indicators point to LeT. The hardware seized after the attack -- a mobile phone, AK-47 and AK-56 rifles, pistols and as many as 17 hand grenades, according to several mainstream press articles -- shows that the attackers were well-equipped, and led the police to conclude that the operation was also well planned. "Indian Express" quoted unnamed security sources as indicating that the grenades recovered were Arges, the same manufacture as those used in the December 13, 2001 attack on Parliament. The use of an official vehicle to breach the external security ring is also similar to the Parliament attack. New Delhi-based terrorism expert Ajai Sahni told Poloff that Jaish-e-Mohammad (JeM) has largely been sidelined from conducting spectacular attacks, and the assault on

Ayodhya did nothing to advance the Kashmir cause (which is Hizbul Mujahedeen's agenda). This equation leaves LeT -- the most effective jihadi outfit for ex-Kashmir operations -- as the likely suspect.

15. (C) Police also point to this attack as following a pattern similar to that used in the September 24, 2002 LeT attack on Akshardham temple in Gujarat. In 2002, two LeT cadres used assault rifles and grenades to kill 32 people and wound over 70. As with Ayodhya, the Akshardham attack was designed as much to inflame religious tensions as to cause casualties. That was followed two months later by lethal assaults on two temples in Jammu City. LeT has targeted Ayodhya in the past; in 2001, one member of an LeT fedayeen squad survived a police encounter in Lucknow and reached Ayodhya before he was killed by security forces.

16. (C) "Hindustan Times" Senior Editor Manoj Joshi theorized that the group that attacked Ayodhya might have been the "third LeT module" supposed to target RSS HQ in Nagpur, after two others (whose targets were reportedly the Indian Military Academy in Dehra Dun and one or more IT firms in Bangalore) were arrested or killed in Delhi on March 5. Other mainstream journalists quoted police sources who said that there had been a recent spike in terrorist "chatter" urging militants in India to execute a spectacular attack after a relative lull in violence.

Symbolic Target Selected to Maximize Communal Fallout

17. (C) Dr. Sahni underlined to Poloff that "there can be no other objective for selecting this target" other than to spark communal violence. He attributed the relative calm in the aftermath to the failure of the attack: "If the attack had been successful, Hindu communalist leaders would have been able to orchestrate at least a few riots or acts of violent protest. The number of fatalities in the attack itself was irrelevant."

18. (C) As with the May 22 Delhi cinema bombings (Reftel), the terrorists failed in their attempt to foment communal retribution after this attack. Indeed, the Hindu hardline RSS issued a public request that all protests be conducted in a "peaceful manner." However, police reportedly resorted to tear gas and water cannons to break up a July 6 demonstration of BJP activists in New Delhi as BJP President LK Advani began his address calling for the resignation of Home Minister Shivraj Patil and Uttar Pradesh Chief Minister Mulayam Singh Yadav. RSO estimates that approximately two thousand people turned out for the Delhi event despite monsoon rains. Further domestic fallout will be covered septel.

GOI Considering Embassy Offer of Technical Assistance

19. (C) RSO offered technical assistance to the Home Ministry, who advised that their team is still processing the crime scene and they would need to determine what their investigative needs were. MHA confirmed that no group has yet claimed responsibility for the attack, and that it is too early in the investigation to indicate who may be responsible.

Indo-Pak Talks not in Jeopardy (Yet)

110. (C) The attack also places the successful Indo-Pak peace process at potential risk. Foreign Minister Natwar Singh, on the margins of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization summit in Kazakhstan, repeatedly told Pakistan Prime Minister Shaukat Aziz that the GOI would soon present Islamabad with "concrete evidence of cross-border terrorism." Meanwhile, in New Delhi, an unnamed senior MEA official reiterated to Reuters that, according to the GOI, infiltration "has decreased but not stopped" and Pakistan "has not dismantled terrorist infrastructure." Dr. Sahni (and many other observers) is convinced that "even if LeT was not the responsible group, the linkages between these terrorists and Pakistan will be just as inexorable." Indian police are now gearing up for follow-on attacks on other religious or historic sites. If later attacks cause greater casualties or damage India's national treasures, it will become increasingly difficult for the GOI to pursue Indo-Pak rapprochement. At a minimum, commentators are renewing calls for the PM to publicly remind Pakistan President Musharraf of his January 6, 2004 pledge not to let territory under Pakistani control be used for terrorism in India, which the PM has long avoided doing.

Kashmiris Denounce Attacks

111. (C) Hizbul Mujahedeen (the largest ethnic Kashmiri terrorist group) and the United Jihad Council quickly

condemned the attack as "anti-Hindu, anti-Muslim, and aimed at provoking riots." The moderate Mirwaiz Hurriyat faction, and then the pro-Pakistan hardline Geelani faction, quickly followed suit, and our journalist contacts in Srinagar say that this incident is viewed there as an impediment to both separatists' agenda and the Indo-Pak peace process. "Daily Excelsior" correspondent Ahmed Ali Fayeze in Srinagar remarked that many people there believe LeT staged the attack. Izhar Wani with AFP in the Valley told us that "moderates, hardliners, everyone is condemning it."

Police On Alert -----

12. (U) Home Secretary VK Duggal confirmed on Indian TV that the GOI had prior information that terrorists planned to target "important installations and religious places" in Uttar Pradesh, which led the state government to increase the numbers and alert level of its security personnel at several sites, including Ayodhya. Delhi Police Commissioner KK Paul announced after the attack that he was calling up more officers, adding that there was no specific threat against targets in the city.
Central Reserve Police Force Credited

13. (U) The attack on the temple complex was repulsed primarily by CRPF commandos, the same security branch that gunned down the JeM terrorists who tried to storm Parliament on December 13, 2001. CRPF forces guard the inner areas of the temple complex, and state security forces provide perimeter defense. A number of leading political party leaders have congratulated the CRPF for their successful defense of the site.

Comment -----

14. (C) The relative calm in the immediate aftermath of the Ayodhya attack suggests there will be no firestorm of communal violence. Indians seem aware that pursuing that path would vindicate the terrorists' plans. The GOI has not launched any official accusations of Pakistani involvement, despite initial suggestions this was an LeT attack, but Natwar Singh's publicized warning to PM Aziz that infiltration continues suggests the government is concerned about the political fallout from persistent cross-border terrorism, despite the broad improvement in relations with Islamabad. A clear finding of LeT responsibility will increase the domestic pressure on the Singh government to do something about it.
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